

Moving the Needle on Tough Community Issues

This workshop was an introduction to means of recognising, processing, and working on “complex problems”. The essential premises are that:

- quite a lot of community and economic development comprises complexity; and
- our most-relied-upon approaches to planning and dealing with issues are inappropriate to complex problems.

The central concern is that, if we do not use problem-solving techniques appropriate to the type of problem we face, consequences can be extreme. For example, if we apply an approach suitable for “simple” problems, solutions will be “cookie-cutter”, generally fragmented and ill-fitting. If we use an approach useful for “complicated” problems, we may fall into a perpetual planning mode, creating elaborate plans that must be “sold” to partners, and endlessly researching, burning resources and time. If we are not clear in defining and understanding the nature of our problem, our response may be chaotic, our solution imposed (a forced fit).

We spent most of our time learning to recognise complex problems, and being introduced to emerging methods for working through them.

First, we worked in groups to discover and clarify the differences between simple, complicated, and complex problems. These classes of problem require completely different problem-solving techniques, and so it is essential that we know in advance which type of problem we are facing when we set out to address it. An example that usually helps people to start thinking about these classes of problem is this:

Simple: baking a cake	Complicated: sending a rocket to the moon	Complex: raising a child
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • recipe is essential • known, proven recipe has replicable results • skill improves results, but lack of skill does not bar success 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • formulae are essential • first success increases assurance of future success • expertise in many fields is essential 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • formulae have limited value • one good experience is no assurance of repeated success • expertise may contribute to, but is neither necessary nor sufficient to assure success
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • recipes give standardised products • good recipes give predictable results 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • rockets are similar in critical ways • outcome is highly predictable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • every child is unique • outcome remains uncertain

The workshop walked us through a variety of recognised (and improving) approaches to working on complex problems. Really, I would say that I was introduced to these ideas. I don’t in any way feel ready to implement anything, certainly not to start passing ideas along, so this is really about key words that you can research on the Internet:

- *Collective impact*: different organisations, funders, governments, sectors work together toward common goals (and ignore or work around differences), relying on and contributing from their own expertise, measuring the same things
- *Change labs*: three very different models that emphasise different orientations to thinking (problem-oriented; approach-oriented; discovery-oriented), for different kinds of complex problem (this was muddy for me; there are lots of online resources to help learn, and even implement, these change labs, but I haven’t reviewed them yet)
- *Positive deviance*: an approach that looks for uncommon practices or behaviours that enable unusual thinkers to find better solutions than others in the community; this approach can enable useful action before underlying causes of a problem are addressed, or even identified. Basically, look for very successful oddballs in the community, and emulate!

We learned that there are serious hazards in getting problem classification wrong, or in shoehorning our thinking into the wrong kinds of solution. We see such problems especially magnified in public funding models, which currently focus on serial application of “best practice” approaches (which work in a ham-fisted way for simple problems, but not at all for much else), “project-based” funding (which forces us to streamline and oversimplify toward a specific result with short time lines, making obtaining funding the “problem”, and narrowing our thinking so that we miss opportunities for real improvement, cross-pollination, true visioning, future planning, and such), and purely politically driven agendas (which confuse problems with extraneous off-point issues).

A couple of additional ideas added dimension to our thinking, as we attempted to apply new ideas about complexity to community or economic development.

First, this view of cooperation as a “continuum of degrees” (a spectrum of collaboration):

We can:

Compete	Co-exist	Communicate	Cooperate	Coordinate	Collaborate	Integrate
for clients, resources, partners, public attention	with no systematic connection between agencies	to develop inter-agency info sharing (e.g., networking)	as needed, often informally, on discrete projects	organisations’ work systematically, to adjust and align work with each other for greater outcomes	in longer-term interactions based on shared mission and goals; share decision-makers and resources	programmes, planning, and funding in a coherent shared vision

The continuum contains *strategic flexibility* to cooperate loosely (from our “turf”) to tightly (from trust), as required.

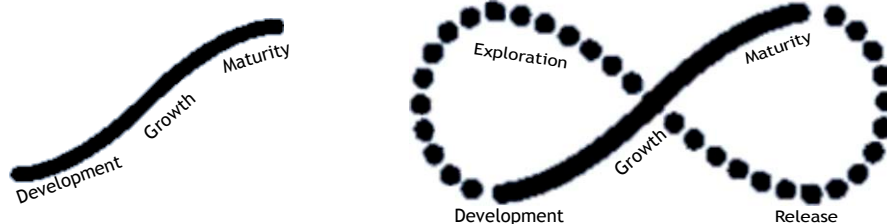
Second, the “renewal loop” idea of organisational development:

We generally think of organisations as having 3 stages of life-cycle:

• development	we start, innovate, develop, adapt
• growth	we refine, scale up, expand
• maturity	we manage, conserve, then begin to cope with decline

The renewal loop adds:

• release	we experience confusion, change, loss, chaos; refine our values, begin to itch to move on, finally accept the end of the organisation we’ve known
• exploration	we seek new engagement, to expand possibilities and buy-in; we begin to innovate once more; we head to rebirth in a new development cycle

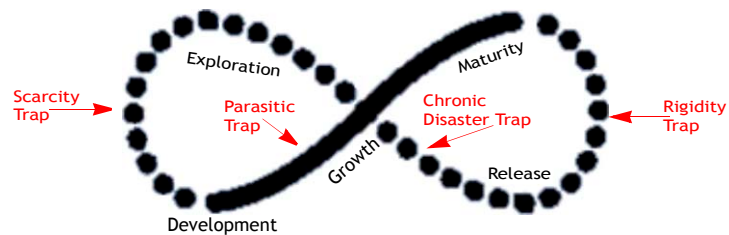


The idea is that organisations/institutions/industries mature and function well for a time, but then enter decline. Rather than always spinning cycles (and expending more and more resources) trying to keep mature organisations doing what they’ve always done (textile industry, automotive industry, pulp mills, ...), we might begin to look forward to their renewal

and rebirth through these additional arcs on the “loop”. Collaborative efforts have *eco-cycles* (cycles of life, destruction, and renewal) and the entire life cycle—including the seemingly destructive part—is critical.

There are common hazards or “traps” that may delay or even derail movement along the loop:

- Rigidity trap
- Chronic disaster trap
- Scarcity trap
- Parasitic trap



As a new development cycle begins, it may falter in a *parasitic trap*—an innovation drains the resources of the parent organisation: we may be unable to develop ideas into processes; resources may be consumed in endless “pilot projects” (sometimes begun in response to funding or taxation models); we may over-devote resources to an innovation that does not scale up to a production model, or that works only in a narrow context that cannot support a continuing industry.

Between maturity and release we may find *rigidity*—we remain stuck in old thinking, patterns, institutional arrangements. We may be too big or important to be allowed to fail (or too familiar/traditional/linked to our culture), and the organisation may focus too much on itself.

Barring movement from release to exploration, there may come *chronic disaster*—we cannot get sufficient traction to leave the past and move forward. We spin our wheels putting out fires, adapting to constantly shifting context (e.g., new rules or legislation coming from outside), and people coming and going. Our focus is on dealing with problems, rather than the business of the organisation.

As we plan a move from exploration to a new development phase, we may fall into the *scarcity trap*—we may find that we have developed too many choices in our re-invention phase, and lack resources to follow them all, or we may have lost a little decisiveness, or, often, we have lost human resources or financial wherewithal during this time, and have difficulty making choices or sparing enough time or money to give our new plan a good start.

There is a great deal of research and writing on the subject of collaborative problem-solving, and using the tools suggested by it to manage complexity, notably from Stanford, and I expect to receive additional materials from the presenter of our workshop. There will be a followup “debrief” (review/discussion/comparison of ways and means) with the attendees in July, which I intend to join.

I was, frankly, overwhelmed with the volume of information presented. For me, this workshop focussed my thinking in certain ways (I’ve been dissatisfied with how we do things/must do things to fit funding models and respond to “focus groups”, but I haven’t had “counter-tools”), but I’ll have to spend a good bit of time with my thoughts before I can really take on the tools that were offered. Younger minds might get further faster...

This is the presenter:

<http://www.naturalstep.ca/mark-cabaj>

And this is a Canadian organisation that has resources to aid further understanding (Mark Cabaj was a founder):

<http://tamarackcommunity.ca/>